

‘A Golly was simply a toy. End of.’: inoculation, attention deflection, and attempted puzzle-resolution in contesting racism in online discussions

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Abstract

In producing arguments against minority groups that are designed to avoid accusations of prejudice, speakers routinely deploy two discursive strategies. One strategy of ‘inoculation’ seeks to ward off such accusations, while the other strategy of ‘attention deflection’ directs attention away from the potential target group. Where despite use of one or both strategies accusations arise, the result is a puzzle that needs to be resolved through explanation. Here, in a discourse analysis of online discussions as to whether ‘blacking up’ is to count as racism, we see contributors contest (1) whether absence of intention to offend inoculates individuals from accountability for potentially racist actions, (2) whether ‘blacking up’ depicts toys/characters rather than people, and (3) whether attempted explanations of accusations of racism work to resolve the apparent puzzle that has arisen. Contributors do not reach any consensus. These findings point to the difficulties in attempting to challenge potential racism.

Keywords: ‘blacking up’; inoculation; attention deflection; online discussions; puzzle-resolution; racism

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Over recent decades a considerable volume of literature has examined how individuals present arguments against members of minority groups that are designed to avoid such talk being heard as prejudiced. Numerous writers point to the discursive resources available to speakers to allow them to ‘dodge the identity of prejudice’ (Wetherell & Potter, 1992, p. 211) in producing talk directed against or organised to justify unfair outcomes towards minority groups. Speakers thus seek to ‘present their beliefs, actions, and feelings about outgroups as the unbiased observations of reasonable people’ (Durrheim, Quayle & Dixon, 2016, p.26). In a review of studies conducted across decades, Augoustinos and Every (2007) identify five discursive strategies that allow speakers to accomplish ‘dodging’ while producing talk that is directed against or organised to justify unfair outcomes towards minority groups. For example, in some instances, speakers may attend to their own potential personal accountability by denying prejudice, by representing their views as the outcome of reasoned argument, or by presenting themselves in a positive light while producing negative evaluations of specific others. Alternatively, speakers may claim that the issues at hand are relevant to broader society rather than merely to a given minority group by using ‘de-racialised’ talk that subsumes minority groups within the societal whole or by referring to generalized ‘liberal’ claims such as appeals to egalitarianism through which anti-discriminatory practices can be criticised as unfair in that they are not applied to the whole population.

Inoculation

A feature common to the first three strategies, those of denying prejudice, grounding

prejudicial remarks against a background of reasoned argument, and managing presentations of self and others, is that these all function as forms of ‘inoculating’ the speaker from accusations of personal prejudice. An explicit denial attends to the possibility that a speaker might be heard as having an irrational and thereby prejudiced disposition towards the group being described (e.g. Billig, 1988; Goodman, 2014; McKinlay & McVittie, 2008; van Dijk, 1992; Xenitidou & Sapountzis, 2018). For example, in a study of how white US college students mobilise criticisms of fellow (black) students, Foster (2009) notes participants commonly deny that their complaints are grounded in race. He cites the example of one white student providing a description of her roommate that argues that ‘I don’t blame it on the fact that (.) she’s black’ (2009, p.691), before going on to criticise that roommate on the basis of the ‘really loud’ way in which she interacts with her friends. The initial denial that the criticism is made on the basis of race allows the speaker to deny that she has a preformed view of black people and their behaviours.

The second form of inoculating the speaker from accusations of prejudice is for the speaker to attribute the critical views being expressed to circumstances external to the speaker thereby offering a rational basis for such views. Tileaga (2005) gives the example of Romanians organising their criticisms of Romanies in ways that place the blame for the views being expressed on Romanies themselves, by describing Romanies as acting in ways that transgress recognised behavioural standards. Such talk grounds the criticisms in the actions and desires of the Romany people and distances the speakers from any personal predisposition towards them as a group.

And, in a third form of inoculation, a speaker can present the self in a positive light and the other negatively. Capdevila and Callaghan (2008), for example, in an analysis of political speeches by the sometime leader of the UK Conservative Party, Michael Howard, show how Howard presented the UK as a welcoming place for immigrants who sought to

contribute economically while arguing against the inclusion of other immigrants. These constructions distanced Howard from the discriminatory arguments being presented by attributing the basis for these views to immigrants themselves and their economic activities in the UK.

Although the research noted above treats inoculation as a matter for a single speaker, Condor and colleagues (Condor, Figgou, Abell, Gibson & Stevenson, 2006, p.441) have noted 'the occurrence of 'racist discourse' is likely to represent a collaborative accomplishment'. Thus, parties to an interaction might seek to inoculate not themselves, but co-present others, from potential accusations of prejudice and the discursive outcome will reflect such interaction rather than solely the talk of one individual. Condor and colleagues show how an elderly couple collaboratively work up such a denial in order to present views towards members of other racial groups as grounded in rational concerns. Thus, a speaker can collaboratively pick up on the prior talk of another in order to inoculate the prior speaker from potential accusations of racism.

What these forms of inoculation are designed to accomplish, then, is to ward off accusations of prejudice by distancing the individual involved from being the source of prejudice towards a minority group. And as seen inoculation can be produced either individually, by the speaker who is providing the negative assessment, or collaboratively, by another person who is co-present when the assessment is provided. As Condor and colleagues (2006) note, one possibility is that inoculation may be produced collaboratively by another person or other persons who are not co-present with the original speaker. We consider this possibility in detail in the present paper.

Attention deflection

In respect of the two other strategies identified by Augoustinos and Every (2007) and

discussed above, we argue that these can be viewed primarily not as strategies to inoculate the speaker but, instead, as strategies that deflect attention away from the target group and onto other, broader, collectivities of people. Thus, in deracialisation talk, a recurring feature is that a minority group under discussion becomes discursively subsumed into a larger or more generic entity that renders invisible specific concerns or entitlements of the minority group. Issues potentially referring to racial minorities thereby are transformed into talk about nations or other collectivities of individuals. One example is provided by Rapley (2001) in a study of the talk of Pauline Hanson, the sometime leader of the Australian One Nation Party in a Parliamentary debate around the remit of the Ministry for Indigenous Affairs. There, Rapley shows how by reformulating the issue at hand as one relevant to the rights of all Australians, a group that includes indigenous Australians, Hanson could argue against attempts to address the longstanding disadvantages of Aboriginal Australians.

In terms of the deployment of 'liberal' claims, Augoustinos and colleagues (Augoustinos, Tuffin, & Every, 2005) show how in arguing against affirmative action that would address such disadvantage, Australian students drew upon discourse of individual merits and the opportunities open to all Australians, thereby reducing the visibility of Aboriginals as those disadvantaged by the absence of affirmative action. In these cases, the group that might be considered to be the recipients of prejudice becomes subsumed into a broader collective, for example one based on nationality, or into a generic description such as 'a person' that can include members of the minority group. Commonly such arguments are associated with claims drawing upon notions of egalitarianism, suggesting that all those included in the broader or vaguer entity should receive equal treatment. These claims work to argue that no part of that entity should be favoured over another, thereby reducing the visibility of any concerns or entitlements that apply only to a particular minority group.

More recently, McVittie and McKinlay (2019) show that this latter approach of deflecting attention away from the minority group and onto other people can be taken further, in talk that does not simply subsume the minority group into a broader entity but which deflects attention to a generic entity to which members of the minority group could not belong. In that study, speakers argued for employment outcomes that would clearly be discriminatory against a minority group by mobilising vague and non-specific categorisations such as ‘someone’ in contexts where these categorizations could not include members of that group. One such example is seen in a discussion where an individual has argued for the employment-related qualities of a Polish worker compared to a British national. In the subsequent turn, another participant raises the question ‘would it not be better to get someone out workin’ (McVittie & McKinlay, 2019, p.25). Posed as an alternative to employing the Polish worker, the use of the term ‘someone’ functions to exclude from consideration for employment preference those belonging to the group previously referred to, namely Polish workers. This phenomenon of ‘safe prejudice’, talk which might appear to be inclusive but which produces a discriminatory outcome, removed the target group altogether from arguments that functioned to exclude them.

The deployment of a collective or generic group, then, can offer a basis for the deflection of attention away from a (disadvantaged) minority group and on to more general claims that erase considerations that might be specific to that group. There might however be instances in which no such general description is readily available, and that the prior context does not offer a basis for the introduction of a broader group of people. In the present paper, therefore, we seek to extend analysis of the range of possibilities that individuals might potentially be able to draw upon in making claims that deflect attention away from a minority group. In particular, we consider here the possibility that the target of any potentially negative action might be reformulated in terms that do not involve people at all.

‘Puzzling’ challenges and attempts at resolution

To date, much of the work conducted into how speakers utilize inoculation and deflection to orient to the possibility of prejudice has treated prejudice largely in terms of how individuals attempt to avoid accusations of prejudice that might be directed at themselves or, in collaborative accomplishment terms, at others.

But when potentially prejudiced talk is produced, it is obvious that subsequent speakers may well offer up a challenge to what has been previously said. For example, some studies (e.g. Robles, 2015; Whitehead, 2015; Whitehead & Stokoe, 2015) have focused on interactions in which recipients who are co-present can use a range of conversational means to withhold acceptance or to challenge potentially prejudiced talk in the course of the interaction. However, in these studies, much of the focus of analysis was on how issues of preference organisation and the production of repairs to previous talk is woven into challenges raised against talk that could be heard as prejudiced. Where substantive challenge talk is examined, focus turns to how speaker-admonishments are produced but with less regard to the consequences of these forms of challenge for subsequent turns.

What is not examined in these previous studies is a particular puzzle associated with speaker inoculation and attention deflection claims: the more a speaker takes his/her inoculation or deflection claims to be effective in warding off accusations of racism, the more apparently puzzling it becomes when such accusations arise. Puzzles of this sort, as Antaki (1994) points out, are bound up with issues of accountability that may require to be addressed by speakers before the interaction can continue. Antaki (1994;1996) notes that in addressing such accountability issues, speakers will seek to ‘make plain’ or ‘explain’ matters in such a way that the puzzle is resolved. Thus, where despite individuals’ attempts to dodge accusations of prejudice such accusations have nonetheless been produced, those who

produce accounts that rely on inoculation or deflection might be expected to attempt to provide exactly this sort of puzzle-resolving explanation. This feature of prejudiced talk has to date, however, remained unexamined. In the present paper, therefore, we examine not only how individuals mobilise and challenge talk that is designed to attend to the possibility of prejudice but also how explanations become relevant and are taken up in that context.

The present study

In this study we turn attention to a phenomenon that has variously being termed ‘wearing blackface’ or ‘blacking up’. This involves the controversial practice of non-black people wearing some form of paint or makeup that darkens the skin and lends accentuation to other features such as the eyes and lips. It is often accompanied by a form of ‘fancy dress’ whose theme is drawn from Black cultural history. Although a controversial practice, evidence indicates that it remains widespread. A review of just one UK newspaper, The Guardian, over five years (2015 to 2019) shows that instances of people wearing ‘blackface’ produced over 250 news articles. Most of these treat such instances as problematic, indicating that the authors disagree with the individuals involved in the reported story about whether this activity is associated with racism. For example, in the space of one week The Guardian reported stories about international fashion brands from clothing to shoe retailers being accused of adopting blackface and the accusation that the American Virginia Governor Ralph Northman ‘blacked up’ when he was a college student. Similar stories have cropped up in media coverage of events around Europe. In the Netherlands and Belgium, controversy has arisen around the character ‘Zwarte Piet’, depicted as a companion of Santa Claus, who wears blackface makeup and a black wig (Doran, 2017). In France, disagreement recently broke out over the adoption by revellers of blackface makeup and costumes during a carnival in the port town of Dunkirk (French News, 2018). A theatre group in Germany, Schlosspark Theatre, has been criticised by an advocacy group, Initiative for Black Germans, for employing white

men wearing blackface makeup instead of employing black actors (BBC News, 2012). More recently, at the time of writing, press reports have described the way in which the Prime Minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, has apologised for adopting ‘blackface’ or ‘brownface’ on a number of occasions when he was a school teacher. In contrast, the UK Conservative Member of Parliament Sir Desmond Swayne has, in October 2019, sought to defend his a previous action of ‘blacking up’ to appear as the soul singer James Brown as ‘an entirely acceptable bit of fun’ for which he refuses to apologise (Bloom, 2019).

The primary point of contention over the practice of ‘blacking up’ is whether the practice is racist. In what follows, we see that participants orient to two concerns. The first is whether those who engage in such practices are to be held responsible for the negative reactions that arise in terms, for example, of whether they themselves intended to cause offence. The second concern relates to whether the characters being portrayed should be understood as depicting a group of people. If the actions of those involved are treated in this manner, then these actions come to be characterised as racist in presenting members of other racial groups in stereotypical and derogatory ways. Conversely, if the characters as portrayed are not taken to resemble people then any potential target group disappears, and the issue of prejudice does not arise.

Here, we focus on one particular episode of ‘blacking up’ occurring in a remote community in Scotland, UK. The episode involved three young people who adopted blackface to participate in the town’s annual gala parade. This practice attracted the attention of UK national media which reported these events amid accusations of racism and bigotry (Mair, 2015), with, for example, a local resident being quoted in the national *Scotsman* newspaper as claiming that for people to dress in this way constituted ‘racism’.

Although the events drew the attention of the national media, here we seek to examine the ways in which those with an explicit concern with local community matters themselves

responded to those events. The national media coverage led to subsequent discussion in a local community online discussion board to which all of those with an interest in local community affairs could participate. As Goodman and Rowe (2014) note, data of this sort represent naturalistic data in that they ‘occurred in the public sphere free from any researcher intervention’ (Goodman & Rowe, 2014, p.35). The discussion board attracted contributions both from those supporting media criticisms of the young people’s actions and from others rejecting the accusations of racism levelled against the three young people. These discussions, then, offer fertile ground for examining how local community members themselves responded to the events in question. As Bliuc and colleagues (2018) noted, two of the strategies used by individuals in online contexts are ‘trivialising and denying racism’ and ‘reframing on the meaning of news stories’ (Bliuc, Faulkner, Jakubowicz & McGarty, 2018, p.82). In the present case, then, analysis of the discussions boards allows for examination of how contributors contested whether specific actions were to count as being prejudiced or racist. They also allow for examination of how individuals draw upon and contest explanations as to why the young people’s actions should not be treated as racist and accountable and why national media had acted incorrectly in identifying them in this way. These are the aims of the present study.

Method

Data

Following media coverage of the actions of the three young people at the gala, one member of the local community on 29 July 2015 set up a discussion thread titled ‘Golliwogs’ on the community discussion board, www.caithness.org. Despite its name, which relates to a specific local community, this board is open to anyone wishing to contribute whether resident locally or further afield. Between 29 July 2015 and 6 August 2015, 103 comments were

submitted asynchronously to this discussion thread. Comments began the day that the national newspapers reported the incident (29 July 2015) and ended a week later, when most contributions had become personal insults against other contributors. No comments have been added since then and the thread is now closed. Contributions to this discussion thread comprise the data for the present study.

Analysis

We read and re-read all contributions in order to become familiar with the data. The first contribution, reproduced below as Extract 1, sought to defend the actions of the three young people and to criticise media coverage of their actions. This initial posting served to frame the following discussions, with most subsequent postings taking up or responding to one or more of the arguments set out there. We examined in detail how subsequent contributors mobilised and contested accusations of racism in characterising the actions of three young people and offered and challenged explanations for these accusations. As discussions progressed, exchanges between contributors came to focus less on the actions of young people themselves and instead comprised personally directed attacks against other contributors and/or comments on the forum itself. These latter exchanges were excluded from analysis. All exchanges relating to the actions of the three young people as taken up in discussions were selected for fine-grained analysis.

Analysis was then conducted using micro forms of discourse analysis (McKinlay & McVittie, 2008). This examined (a) participants' own concerns relating to the issues under discussion, drawing on principles of ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967); (b) how these concerns were made explicit and negotiated in the sequential organisation of the talk in the discussions, drawing on principles of conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992); (c) if and how participants in their contributions mobilised constructions of psychological phenomena such

as motivations, in line with principles of discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992). Analysis attended to the lexical items and forms of argument deployed in these exchanges, and to the contrasts and other rhetorical forms that contributors deployed in constructing and mobilising their arguments. In particular, analysis focused on how contributors oriented to inoculation and deflection talk in contesting or warranting accusations of racism, and on contributors' deployment of explanations in discussion of the actions of the young people and the accusations that had been made and how such explanations were taken up in further discussions.

The exchanges presented below retain the original spellings and grammar. Where a contributor directly responded to the posting of a prior contributor this is shown, along with the username of that contributor, by the system-generated 'originally posted by' comment. To ease readability of the exchanges, we have italicised these prior postings in the extracts below. Although some usernames appear to include masculine names such as 'John', there is no evidence available on whether the individuals involved actually were male. As Oh (2018) notes, 'it is the racialized, rhetorical purposes of online comments more than actual identities that matter in cyberspace' (Oh, 2018, p.307). Accordingly, we have treated all the participants in a gender-neutral fashion when analysing their contributions.

The data are in the public domain at <http://forum.caithness.org/showthread.php?244213-Golliwogs>. The study was conducted in accordance with the principles set out in the British Psychological Society's (2013) *Ethics guidelines for Internet-mediated research*. As Jowett (2015) notes, the circumstances under which it is ethically appropriate for researchers to use internet-based data in research studies has been topic of much discussion, with a primary consideration being that as to whether the data are publicly accessible or those involved might reasonably have some expectation of privacy. In the present case, all data in the forum being considered are readily available for

public inspection and, indeed, the postings suggest that the contributors are seeking to comment widely on issues of broad public concern. As Jowett (2015) argues, in such circumstances it would not be reasonable for the individuals involved to have an expectation of privacy that would preclude their contributions from research consideration. Ethical approval for the study was granted by a University Ethics Committee.

The extracts provided below exemplify the forms of talk found throughout the data set and thus demonstrate fidelity to the participants' own constructions of the topics under discussion. Furthermore, by reproducing these data in full and providing detailed analysis of these that is grounded in participants' talk, we provide the reader with opportunity to evaluate the utility of that analysis in addressing the research aims of the study. The present paper thereby meets the requirement of 'methodological integrity', proposed by Levitt and colleagues (Levitt, Motolsky, Wertz, Morrow, & Ponterotto, 2017) as the appropriate criterion for evaluating the quality of a study such as this one.

Results

In the analyses below, we initially explore how participants use the discussion thread to evince different orientations to the question of whether 'blacking up' constitutes racism.

The initial post to the thread is presented below as Extract 1. The subsequent extracts show how other contributors took up one or other of the topics raised in that initial thread contribution and expanded upon it to argue for, or against, the notion that what the three young people did at the gala constituted a racist act. In Extract 1, John33 thus frames what subsequent contributors will orient to as the 'terms of reference' for the ensuing debates.

Extract 1

1	John33	Note the news that three people who dressed up as "Golliwogs"
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2	during Wick gala has gone viral. The world has gone crazy!! I am
3	sure they never intended any racism what so ever. Just dressing up
4	for a good night out. Type in Golliwog in Google images and many
5	thousands of images are shown all off dolls which I am sure they
6	were trying to represent.
7	At the moment ISIS are killing many thousands of people by
8	throwing them of high buildings, drowning them in cages , mass
9	execution etc etc as all the supposed great nations of this world stand
10	back or make a very poor token effort to suppress it.
11	We need to get real and get after the hard issues not the soft ones.

In this extract, John33 produces inoculation and deflection claims that are designed to address the question of whether events at the Gala should be construed as prejudiced. These two claims are embedded within an explanatory framework in which John33 addresses media accusations of racism. In a context in which he/she has presented relevant events as non-prejudiced, John33 treats the making of media claims of racism as a ‘puzzle’ that needs to be resolved.

John33’s inoculation claim, at lines 2 to 4, takes the form of a ‘collaborative accomplishment’ in which he/she defends the actions of others who attended the Gala. Here, the inoculation refers to the intentions of these individuals in that ‘they never intended any racism’. This claim is similar to that seen in the first form of inoculation discussed above, namely disclaimers, in referring to the (absence of) psychological states of the individuals involved and denying that their actions were motivated by bias or disposition towards the potential target group. This inoculation claim is worked up in a variety of ways: John33 emphasises his/her personal commitment to the claim as something that he/she is ‘sure’

about; he/she stresses the completeness of what it is being claimed, in that no racism was intended 'what so ever'; he/she down-grades the news-worthiness of the activities involved in describing them as 'Just dressing up' and as 'a good night out' thereby evaluating such activities positively rather than negatively.

At lines 4 to 6, John33 produces a deflection claim that argues that those individuals whose actions are being characterised were 'trying to represent' 'dolls' rather than people belonging to a particular group. Once again, John33 works up this claim in several ways: it is presented as certain, in that John33 is 'sure' of it; it is presented as something that could be objectively verified by using computer-generated search processes; it is also presented as a widespread phenomenon, in that such a search would generate 'many thousands' of supporting images of 'dolls' rather than people, and that these constitute a consensus in that they 'all' support such a view.

These inoculation and deflection claims are here set within an explanatory framework of the sort identified by Antaki (1994), comprising a puzzle and attempted puzzle-resolution. John33 provides these claims to attend to accountability on the part of those involved in the events at the Gala. Yet, as is made explicit at the beginning of the post at lines 1 to 2, those involved have nonetheless been treated as accountable for the relevant actions. John33 draws attention to recent media coverage of the events, indicating the status given to them as 'news', and referring to the extent of that coverage in that it has 'gone viral'. John33 argues that this is an irrational response, stating that 'The world has gone crazy'. It therefore becomes puzzling that, notwithstanding the lack of accountability that is developed through the inoculation and deflection claims, those involved are being treated as accountable.

John33 offers a resolution of this puzzle at the end of the post, lines 7 to 11. His/her resolution, and hence explanation for how others have responded to the Gala day events, rests on a contrast between activities at the Gala and different actions and events that are more

appropriate targets for media attention. In contrasting the consequentiality of these latter actions and events with the inconsequentiality of events at the Gala, John33 rhetorically emphasises the seriousness of what is being described by referring both to number and to culpability. In describing the actions of ISIS, he/she refers to unlawful deaths which have a high rate of occurrence in that ISIS kills ‘many thousands’, and he/she provides further emphasis on the extent of such deaths by the listing structure used to provide examples of what such killing involves. John33 also draws attention to the lack of response to these events by the relevant authorities, arguing that ‘all the supposed great nations of this world’ take no action in that they ‘stand back’ or make a ‘token effort to suppress’ them. He/she encapsulates this criticism in the upshot, stating ‘We need to get real and get after the hard issues not the soft ones’. The proposed resolution to the puzzle of why ‘the world’ has ‘gone crazy’ by criticising people who should not be held accountable for racism, becomes one of wholly inappropriate external responses to different events: media and external attention is not directed where it should appropriately be directed.

Inoculation

One argument put forward by John33 above sought to inoculate those involved in Gala events on grounds of lack of racist intention. The next extract shows how one participant, davth, challenged this argument.

Extract 2

1	davth	Wether racism was intended or not is not the point here. "Blacking
2		up" IS RACIST. Ignorance is no excuse

davth’s posting to the discussion board followed shortly after John33’s initial posting.

davth does not directly reject John33's inoculation argument by claiming that those involved intended to commit a racist act. Instead davth challenges the relevance of John33's claim, arguing that, even if that claim is correct, lack of intention does not exonerate the individuals involved from accountability for offence.

In Extract 1, John33's attempted inoculation of those involved rested on the absence of psychological states that would indicate bias or prejudice towards the potential target group. Here, however, davth argues that the presence or absence of any psychological disposition towards the group in question is not a relevant issue, stating that intention 'is not the point here'. davth emphasises this claim by referring to the actions in question, characterising and assessing these actions as "Blackening up". Here, the use of inverted commas draws readers' attention to the potentially problematic status of the expression and the activity described. And davth then makes explicit what precisely falls to be treated as problematic, emphasising through capitalisation that the activity 'IS RACIST'. These features together present the activities of those attending the Gala as being the relevant issue for consideration and discount altogether the role of intention proposed by John33.

davth's final statement, 'Ignorance is no excuse', further discounts any relevance of psychological states in assessing the actions of the three individuals. It rejects any possible relevance of state of knowledge at the time, and thereby again argues for accountability to be judged on the basis of the actions themselves. This statement is set out in an idiomatic manner (Drew & Holt, 1989), suggesting that it is commonly recognised as accurate and requires no further warrant for it to be accepted. In rejecting the relevance of intention, characterising the actions of relevant individuals as racist, and dismissing state of knowledge as a possible mitigating factor, davth seeks to undermine John33's inoculation argument that distanced those involved from accountability for racism.

In order to fully examine this sort of contest over what is to count as prejudice or

racism, we turn now to another contributor's immediate response to davth's argument. Here, the contributor, Bogbrush, seeks to reinstate the inoculation argument that davth attempted to undermine. In this extract, davth's challenge to John33 is italicised as quoted text and is followed by Bogbrush's response to that challenge.

Extract 3

1	Bogbrush	<i>Originally Posted by davth</i>
2		<i>Wether racism was intended or not is not the point here. "Blacking</i>
3		<i>up" IS RACIST. Ignorance is no excuse</i>
4		Really, m'Lud? I'd say intent is quite important and is very much
5		part of the point, unless you subscribe to the burgeoning field of
6		'whiteness studies'.

One feature of davth's argument was that it comprised three declarative statements. davth treated these claims as being self-sufficient and authoritative in specifying how accountability for events at the Gala should be understood. This framing provides a focus for the response by Bogbrush that seeks, first to undermine davth's discounting of lack of intention as an inoculation against accountability, and second to explain why davth is making such claims in the present discussion.

Bogbrush's challenge begins at line 4 with a question, 'Really, m'Lud?'. Here, the prefacing of the response with 'Really' indicates that what will follow will contrast with or otherwise raise potential difficulties for the claims that preceded it. At the same time, the form of address adopted, 'm'Lud', suggests that davth has acted in a particular way in setting out his/her claims: 'm'Lud' is a form of address usually deployed in courtroom settings to demonstrate deference to the presiding judge. Here, Bogbrush's ironic use of the term

suggests that davth's declarative statements resemble talk that commonly would be found in a courtroom setting, but that davth has acted inappropriately in seeking to take up this role.

Bogbrush continues at lines 4 to 5 by referring to 'the point', echoing davth's previous description. Here, the salient issue is reworked as one in which attribution of intent is central, described as 'very much part of the point'. In prefacing this claim with 'I'd say', Bogbrush presents it as an individual view, in contrast to davth's unwarranted assertions as to what is to count as racism.

As was the case in Extract 1, the claim that events at the Gala did not constitute racism is set within a framework that seeks to explain why accusations of racism have nonetheless arisen. The final part of Bogbrush's contribution at lines 5 to 6 offers a resolution of this apparent puzzle. Here Bogbrush argues that claims such as those made by davth, rather than being self-evident descriptions of how the events at the Gala are to be understood, instead are motivated by a personal interest or 'stake' (Potter, 1996) in what is being claimed. Bogbrush's reference to 'the burgeoning field of 'whiteness studies'' suggests that those like davth, who make such claims are motivated by a specific interest to find and identify instances of racism. The resolution of the puzzle, then, is not that John33 and Bogbrush and others seek incorrectly to inoculate the three individuals at the Gala against accountability but, rather, that those like davth who discount the inoculation do so because they have a specific motivation to treat people as accountable for racism.

Deflection

In the following extract, we examine how contributors to the board attended to the attention deflection claim made out by John33 in the original post. The following extract appears in the exchange following a post which (a) describes claims made by a UK member of Parliament (MP) to the effect that what happened at the gala was racism and (b) describes

claims made by a human rights lawyer, Aamer Anwar, that people who do not recognize such activities as racism are 'pathetic'.

Extract 4

1	crashbandicoot1979	I'm not going to be offended by a kid dressed as a Golly because
2		an MP tells me I should be. I'll decide what offends me, and this
3		doesn't. So that makes me pathetic? Good to know, thanks
4		Aamer Anwar. I have never, in my life, ever associated a Golly
5		with a black person or assumed its a parody of a black person.
6		To me they're a toy. A character. For that reason, I'm no more
7		offended by a Golly than by Spongebob Square Pants.
8		Admittedly I would be offended by someone calling a black
9		person those names, but that's because of the context behind it.
10		Just my opinion. I grew up in a non-racist household where a
11		Golly was simply a toy. End of. They're characters from a
12		marmalade jar, not black people. That's how I see it. There are
13		far bigger race issues in the country right now than this. The
14		fuss over it has solved nothing.

In Extract 1, John33 sought to deflect attention away from a potential target group by arguing that those at the Gala were not depicting people at all but instead were dressed up to resemble dolls. Here, crashbandicoot1979 sets out a similar argument that seeks to remove any potential target group from consideration. Again, this is set within an explanatory framework that attempts to resolve the puzzle as to why, in such circumstances, those involved face accusations of racism.

In this instance, the attention deflection claim takes the form of what Antaki and Wetherell (1999) term a 'show concession'. In this three-part structure, an individual advances a proposition, makes an apparent concession to a counter point of view, and subsequently reprises the original proposition. The advantage of doing this, as Antaki and Wetherell note, is that the concession demonstrates awareness of an alternative argument while discounting its relevance to the immediate context, thereby strengthening the claim being made. Here, crashbandicoot1979 at lines 4 to 6 argues in extreme terms that 'I have never, in my life' made an association between 'a Golly' and 'a black person'. This is combined with a claim that the term 'Golly' picks out 'a toy. A character' (line 7), made out through an analogy between the character 'Golly' and another children's character, 'Spongebob Square Pants' (lines 7 to 8). Potentially, given its extreme formulation, such an argument might be open to challenge that crashbandicoot1979 should recognise the possibility of an association and is blind to the racist overtones of the character. The concession at lines 8 to 9, however, where crashbandicoot1979 demonstrates awareness of potential racism in stating that he/she 'would be offended by someone calling a black person those names', orients to such a possibility. This concession thereby is designed to ward off challenge and to allow crashbandicoot1979 at lines 10 to 12 to reprise the original deflection argument that 'Golly' does not refer to people, in a manner that is treated as conclusive: 'Golly was simply a toy. End of'.

crashbandicoot1979 also seeks to strengthen this argument, that the description applies to characters and not people, through repeated use of the referring term 'Golly' rather than 'Golliwog'. 'Golly' does not have the potentially problematic associations that exist between the term 'golliwog' and the racial slur 'wog', a term which is not only racially offensive but racially offensive to a specific group of people. By avoiding 'wog' in his/her own terminology, crashbandicoot1979 minimizes such potential associations. Moreover, the

use of a capital 'G' indicates that rather than being a term referring to a collectivity it is, instead, a proper noun that picks out a specific toy.

As in Extract 1 and Extract 3 above, the defence here of those accused of racism is set within a framework that seeks to explain why they have (incorrectly) been treated as accountable. In working up this explanation, crashbandicoot1979 picks out the issue of who is to determine what is to count as prejudice and therefore offensive. He/she, at lines 1 to 3, distinguishes between accepting something as offensive because an authority figure says it is and making personal judgements on offensiveness. crashbandicoot1979 rejects the former and instead claims 'I'll decide what offends me, and this doesn't'. He/she later provides further emphasis on the personalized nature of such judgements in stating that 'To me they're a toy. A character' (lines 6 to 7), in providing a source for the claim that is specific to his/her own personal history in stating that his/her views were formed in the parental home, which he/she describes as 'non-racist', and in claiming 'That's how I see it' (lines 12 to 13). crashbandicoot1979 treats these claims as self-evident in arguing for an individual to determine for himself/herself what is to count as offensive.

This distinction, between relying on inappropriate external sources and making appropriate personal judgements in determining (in)offensiveness, paves the way for crashbandicoot1979's upshot at lines 13 to 14 that 'There are far bigger race issues in the country right now than this'. The upshot, as well as offering a conclusion to arguments about determining offensiveness and consequent accountability/non-accountability, provides a resolution to the puzzle of why individuals are being accused of prejudice in circumstances where these accusations are not appropriate. And, as seen in earlier extracts, this resolution is based not upon events at the Gala but instead on the actions of those responding to them: those who (incorrectly) level accusations of prejudice based on the authority of others instead of making personal judgements are engaging in a 'fuss' that 'has solved nothing'.

At this point, it is useful once again to consider how this sort of contest over what is to count as prejudice or racism manifests in subsequent interactions. Above, we examined how challenges to inoculation in turn produced accounts that sought to reinstate it. Here, in relation to deflection, we examine the inverse: a case in which an attempt at deflection draws a subsequent challenge. In the following extract, golach responds to the claims set out by crashbandicoot1979.

Extract 5

1	golach	Your attitude is stuck in the 1950's, things and the world have
2		changed. Even Robersons got rid of their trade marks long time ago,
3		thank goodness, being called a golly..g or a nig. g is offensive to
4		many all around the world these days, if the three who were
5		"blackened" were children, it was adults that dressed them like that,
6		and they would have/should have known the offence that would
7		cause.

In addressing crashbandicoot1979's attention deflection claim, golach's argument seeks to re-direct attention towards people rather than inanimate objects. As seen above, crashbandicoot1979's claim that the target of the individuals' actions at the Gala was not people rested on two elements, first that they dressed to resemble 'toys'/'characters', and second that the appropriate referring term for the character should be that of 'Golly'. Here, golach seeks to undermine both elements and to re-instate accountability for events at the Gala.

In challenging crashbandicoot1979's claim that the individuals at the Gala were portraying characters and not a group of people, golach sets out a temporal distinction

between how such characters were understood in an earlier historical period and how they are understood now. The difference between these periods is marked by the reference at lines 1 to 2 to ‘things and the world have changed’ and the reference at line 4 to ‘these days’. The extent of this change is emphasised at line 2 by the claim that ‘Even Robersons got rid of their trade marks long time ago’. Here golach does not make explicit the relevance of this description but rather treats it as common knowledge that Robertsons is a UK jam-making company that for many years used on their products a trade-mark that depicted a ‘gollywog’. This reference thus rhetorically emphasises the claim that understandings of the character being discussed have changed: if the company that gained most commercially from using the character to promote its products no longer treats that character as acceptable, then this points to its highly problematic associations. golach then at lines 3 to 4 sets out what is now problematic about the use of the character, arguing that on grounds of its racist associations it ‘is offensive to many all around the world’. The temporal distinction between how the character is understood ‘these days’ and how it was viewed in earlier times thereby provides warrant for golach’s criticism that crashbandicoot1979’s ‘attitude is stuck in the 1950’s’ and rejects the argument that portrayal of these characters does not depict people.

golach also re-directs attention towards a particular target group by using a referring term that is somewhat different to the term ‘Golly’ used by crashbandicoot1979. Instead of taking up that term, golach substitutes the term ‘golly..g’. Although the term ‘golly..g’ is not itself a word in the English language, within this context it is arguable that the two dots have been substituted for the letters ‘w’ and ‘o’, such that golach can be taken to be claiming that the term ‘gollywog’ is an offensive term. In identifying which aspect of the term is to be treated as offensive, with ‘wog’ being replaced with ‘..g’, golach draws attention to the sensitivity of the term ‘wog’, in that its use makes relevant racist connotations through the description being applicable to a group of people, not a toy. Moreover, the use of a lower-

case ‘g’ at the start of the term functions to undermine crashbandicoot1979’s use of the upper-case ‘G’, and the attempt to treat ‘Golly’ as the name of a toy/character, rather than a more generally referring term.

These challenges to crashbandicoot1979’s claims as to how the character in question is to be understood and referred to, and golach’s redirection of attention to the potential target group of people, lead to an upshot that reinstates accountability for events at the Gala. Here, golach orients to the possible claim that those involved should not be held accountable if they were ‘children’, arguing that this might be relevant only to the extent of determining who is to be held accountable. Thus, should those who ‘blacked’ not be treated as accountable, then the ‘adults’ who allowed or arranged for these actions ‘would have/should have known the offence’ that would result and should be treated as accountable for the resulting ‘offence’.

Challenging puzzle-resolution

In discussing Extract 1, we noted that John33 produced inoculation and deflection claims within a context provided by explanatory discourse in which a puzzle was identified and then resolved. In the first part of the final extract below, we note that the contributor, nicnak, produces a post which is similar in form. Here, however, we turn attention to the way in which explanatory frameworks of this sort can, themselves, open up grounds for challenge.

Extract 6 comprises two turns in the discussion that were posted 17 minutes apart and that orient to this issue. One intervening turn, from a different participant, that did not directly take up the issue at hand is omitted.

Extract 6

1	nicnak	There are murders, missing adults and children amongst other
2		horrendous things going on in this world and all the police and

3		papers can do is try to torment and terrify these people, as a child
4		one of my favourite pass times was collecting gollywog stickers and
5		badges, some folk need to take a step back and remember the good
6		things and not turn them into negatives, I for one never made any
7		racist connection and am sure there are many more like me, so carry
8		on kids have a great time! (and for those of you that might suggest
9		any form of racialism in that there is none!)
10	BetterTogether	So a total of 15 news outlets have run the story all condemning the
11		action of those who decided to black up for the gala.
12		Then we have the historic over the last twenty years of
13		condemnation of the use of the term and why it's considered racially
14		offensive.
15		But here we have the great and wise people of Caithness deciding
16		that regardless of what opinions are nationwide they are the arbiters
17		of what is and isn't racially acceptable.
18		I'd rather take note of the rest of the country than a few people who'd
19		rather bury their heads in the sand and pretend things haven't
20		changed since the 1970s.
21		Maybe you'll all be happy when the media starts quoting some of
22		your comments in the press to show how racially intolerant and
23		unaware you are.
24		It's not for white people in a predominantly white populace town to
25		decide whether it's racially offensive or don't you see how bigoted
26		your responses are.

As was the case in John33's post, here the first contributor presents a 'collaborative accomplishment' inoculation claim. At lines 6 to 8, nicnak provides an inoculation argument in which the activities of the 'kids' in question are evaluated positively, being described as activities that should 'carry on' because they constitute 'a great time'. The non-racist character of such a 'great time' is warranted by nicnak's appeal to how relevant activities are to be understood. This warrant is given emphasis in terms of its longstanding duration and extensiveness, 'I for one never made any racist connection' (lines 6 to 7) and the extent to which such a view is shared by others, in that nicnak is 'sure there are many more like me'.

At lines 4 to 5, nicnak provides an attention deflection claim. Events at the gala in which individuals blacked up are claimed not to involve racism because nicnak himself/herself previously engaged in gollywog-related activities: 'collecting gollywog stickers and badges'. The non-controversial nature of these activities is made out in terms of the status of 'gollywog' as referring to 'stickers and badges' rather than to people, in terms of the preferred status of collecting such items in that it was a 'one of my favourite pass times' (line 4) and in terms of its current evaluative status as an activity that should be remembered as 'good' rather than 'negatives' (lines 5 to 6).

In setting out these claims nicnak, like other contributors, orients to the apparent puzzle of why accusations of prejudice have arisen in circumstances that on his/her arguments render such accusations inappropriate. The post begins at lines 1 to 2 with a description that is designed through its listing structure (Jefferson, 1990) to emphasise the extent of 'horrendous things going on in this world' while also providing specific examples of such 'things' in the form of 'murders' and 'missing adults and children'. The range of external events requiring attention thus goes beyond the actions of a single group, suggested by John33 in Extract 1. Continuing at lines 2 to 3, nicnak also refers to the failure of specific agents, 'the police and papers', to address such matters in that attending to events at the Gala

is ‘all’ that they ‘can do’. nicnak, like Bogbrush in Extract 3, also invokes the relevance of the motivation of those making accusations but here characterises that motivation as itself culpable, describing the actions of those agents as being designed to ‘torment and terrify’ those who are being accused. This, at the same time, offers a rationale similar to that proposed by crashbandicoot1979 in Extract 4 as to why such views should not determine what is to count as offensive: if they are being produced on the basis of improper and culpable motives, then others should not be influenced by them. Taken together, these elements constitute for nicnak a resolution of the puzzle that has arisen, in that the relevant agencies not only fail to respond to consequential matters but respond in criticisable ways to inconsequential ones and attempt to influence others as they do so.

Thus, as seen above, contributors who attempted puzzle-resolutions as to why accusations of prejudice had arisen incorrectly in relation to events at the Gala all relied on a form of *ad hominem* argument: those making such accusations acted inappropriately in doing so. Although such claims potentially offer explanations, they do so at some risk of making relevant for discussion not just the events at the Gala but the question of who gets to characterise these events and to determine whether accountability is to apply. Attempted puzzle-resolutions, then, can themselves come in for challenge. More than this, however, the very act of producing a puzzle-resolution can provide grounds for further claims of prejudice. We see these come together in Extract 6 in BetterTogether’s challenge to the explanation offered by nicnak.

In this response, we see BetterTogether take up the two elements made available by nicnak’s attempted explanation of why accusations of racism had been made in circumstances where these were not appropriate. Here, BetterTogether argues first that the accusations of racism have been made appropriately not inappropriately, and second that those like nicnak who seek to ward off such accusations through explanation are themselves acting in a racist

manner.

BetterTogether's first argument rests on a contrast between those who described events at the Gala as racist and those who treat such accusations as puzzling. The former group is described as responding by 'condemning the action' and is portrayed as providing a widely shared view of how this action is to be understood, in that it is described in this way by 'a total of 15 news outlets'. Further weight for this argument is found in the claim at lines 12 and 14 that such a response, that of 'condemnation', is one that has been held over a long period of recent history, namely 'the last twenty years'. These references present 'condemnation' as representing a consensual and well-established responses to events such as those being discussed. The latter group, those who treat such a response as puzzling, is described in terms that minimise their understanding of the relevant issues, through the use of the ironic 'the great and wise people of Caithness'. BetterTogether also argues that this group acts inappropriately in that they attempt to promote views that are limited to the local area and that do not take account of broader understandings by seeking to act as 'arbiters' of the issues 'regardless of what opinions are nationwide'. The divergent arguments of the two groups are then encapsulated in the upshot at lines 18 to 20, where BetterTogether contrasts the responses of 'the rest of the country' to events at the Gala with those of 'a few people' who fail to take account of historical changes or of broader understandings. This is combined with an evaluation that sets out the first response as one that he/she would 'take note of' and the second as one based on what those involved 'pretend'. On this argument, then, responses that respond to events at the Gala with accusations of racism are consistent with consensual and longstanding views of what constitutes racism: they do not fall to be treated as 'puzzling'.

In the second part of the response, at lines 21 to 26, BetterTogether continues by challenging the production of accounts that seek to explain accusations of racism as deriving

from the inappropriate actions of others. Here, it is argued that such attempted explanations are in themselves indications of ‘how racially intolerant and unaware’ those who offer such explanations are. BetterTogether goes on to criticise those who have offered such explanations as acting inappropriately in producing them by taking up a position that reflects the limited and partial views of ‘white people in a predominantly white populace town’. This leads to the conclusion that the attempts at puzzle-resolution are in themselves evidence of racial bias and offensive in being ‘bigoted’.

Discussion

At the start of this paper, we discussed previous research findings on racist discourse and argued that individuals, in producing talk that might be challenged as racist towards minority groups, seek to attend to the possibility of such challenge in either or both of two ways: inoculation or deflection.

First, we focused on the area of inoculation as a collaborative accomplishment that involves speakers inoculating others who are not co-present: what might be termed ‘inoculation at a distance’. This is an important issue because arguably in many everyday cases inoculation at a distance is a common form of other-inoculation. For example, the actions of public figures such as politicians, sportspeople or celebrities often come under scrutiny in contexts where the actors themselves are not present and those seeking to justify their actions through inoculation are required to rely on inoculation at a distance.

Second, the analysis of deflection presented here goes beyond previous studies, in which attention was seen to be deflected onto other people, to consider instances in which talk is claimed to be directed towards non-human targets. Once again, we suggest that this practice may be more prevalent than is accounted for in previous literature. For example, in recent years a number of European countries have imposed restrictions of the wearing of full-

face veils, with proponents of these restrictions citing features of this form of clothing, such that the face is hidden, as problematic. However, opponents of such legislation have argued that the real effect of such laws is not associated with appropriateness of items of clothing but, rather, prejudice towards Muslim women.

Third, in setting out these analyses of inoculation and deflection talk, we have also attended to a further unexamined feature of prejudiced talk, which we describe as ‘puzzle resolution’. In contrast to previous studies that have focused primarily on the talk of individuals and their attempts to dodge accusations of prejudice, and studies that have examined the conversational structures of immediately consequent talk, here we have looked at inoculation and deflection talk in contexts of direct challenge. And, in doing so, we see that those who have sought to inoculate or deflect in attending towards actual or potential accusations of racism appear to treat their talk as though it is associated with an inherent puzzle: the more successful one takes one’s inoculations or deflections to be, the more one is faced with an apparent puzzle in that other people nevertheless insist on describing one’s position as prejudiced. In exploring this theme, we have examined the way in which, as is the case with inoculation and deflection claims, puzzle-resolution talk that proceeds by challenging media accounts can itself become a focus for renewed criticism. In this respect, participants here appear to reflect that broader cultural concern that has come to be referred to as ‘fake news’. In particular, like those who question or to uphold the veracity of accounts that appear in mainstream media or in social media, the participants here draw on a perspective in which what is said by public figures or by the media is a matter that is unproblematically open for debate. It is this ambiguous stance towards the media and their activities that provides a context in which external accusations of racism can be either undermined or supported.

Finally, there remains the question of how we are to understand what is to count as

racism or prejudice in contexts such as these. As the present findings clearly demonstrate, the collaborative outcome of the discussions examined here is that the question of whether the actions of those who dressed in blackface are to be deemed to constitute racism remains a point of contention. Later contributions to the discussion thread omit arguments about the subject matter of prejudice and instead comprise personal criticisms of previous contributors. This turn to personal criticisms is reflected in the final contribution, which closes the thread, in which a contributor criticises the way in which the interaction has developed and states ‘this might be a good place to point out the forum rules that you signed up with’. The issue of whether the actions of the three individuals who dressed up for the Gala are to count as racism thus remains unresolved. And, we would argue, such an outcome is potentially common in settings in which participants themselves debate not only the issue, but also the explanatory framework and broader social context in which actions such as these are located. Indeed, the continuing incidence of actions and events involving the use of blackface points to the absence of consensus as to how this practice is to be understood. These, then, and other such actions which are equally open to debate and lack of ultimate resolution, demonstrate some of the difficulties that inevitably arise in attempts to challenge potential racism in current society.

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